



Taking a Fresh Look at Meetings

How web-based meetings will transform physical meetings

The current growth in web based meetings is seen by many as a mixed blessing. On the one hand it provides a welcome 'step up' from telephone calls and conference calls as an alternative to travel, but on the other hand web-based meetings do appear to suffer increased levels of disengagement and non-participation over traditional meetings.

While web-based meetings have great potential to save travel costs and time, a lot of this remains unrealised (*or realised at a consequential cost*) because many people feel that the web is not a viable channel for the most sensitive and important discussions; that in some cases the benefits of travel savings are massively outweighed by risk and lost potential. They believe that the limitations of web-based interactions mean that web-based meetings are inherently less effective.

But they are wrong! They are wrong because the limitation lies not in web-based meetings, but actually in their understanding and use of those web-based meetings.

The majority of people running web based meetings are oblivious to at least half of the key functionality within them, and less than 5% have any real awareness of the core tools which support effective engagement and participation. In the absence of any guidance to the contrary (*the vast majority of managers have received no training in this whatsoever*) what management have done is simply transpose their current process for physical meetings into the web based environment. And there are two key problems with this.

The first problem is that the web is actually a *different* environment and therefore is far better suited to a different approach, and the second problem is that the commonly used process for most physical meetings is actually fundamentally flawed in the first place.

Let us take the second point first. The basic *process* of

meetings is largely unchanged over centuries, and is rooted back into a time when life was far more autocratic. While other core business processes, including those of management and leadership have been transformed over the last half century, our approach to meetings (*which is after all, the key mechanism for delivery of leadership and management*) remains stubbornly unchanged. Most meetings are still essentially show and tell, with a bit of round-table debate.

The result of this is that meetings are actually surprisingly ineffective in delivering their objectives (*compared to other core business processes*), and are very poor at engaging everybody and building commitment. While they often appear to have participation, that participation is rarely universal, and as the issues become more important and more contentious, we often find that the views of the more reflective members of our teams are squeezed out by their more vociferous, shoot-from-the-hip colleagues. Furthermore, that participation is largely dependent on visual cues such as facial expressions and body language,

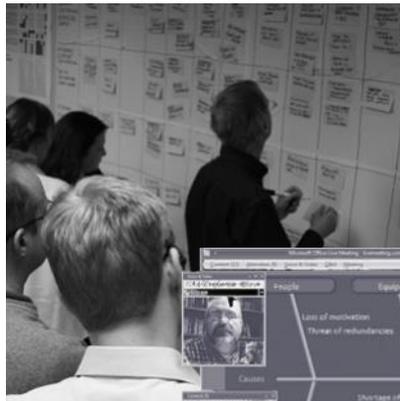
which are actually quite poor at conveying accurate and complex messages.

And this brings us neatly back to the first point because, poor as visual cues may be in fulfilling the possibilities of participation, when they are the only means your meeting process utilises to achieve participation, they are vitally important - and web-based meetings are undeniably poor in this area.

Conversely, there are physical meetings that are amazingly good at engagement and participation. They use wall space, post-it notes, group-working, and creativity or decision making tools to develop compelling answers and build consensus and commitment around them. Sadly, their demands on space, facilities and very large posters mean that these meetings are only rarely held (one exam-

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ple may be off-site workshops), but they are many times more effective in attaining objectives and ensuring progress and, ironically, they are actually far easier to hold over the web than they are to arrange in a physical venue. It is these processes that we need to turn to if we are to realise the potential in this new environment, and it is the functionality that supports this that we really need to train our people on. We need to equip our people with a process which exploits the strengths of the new medium and not its weaknesses.



The results of doing so have amazing pay-back, and the scale and immediacy of the ROI from this represents a better business case than virtually anything else available to most organisations. Based on a survey of managers across 50 different organisations, we estimate that effective training provides an immediate annual pay back of c. £10,000 travel costs, 450 hours of travel time, and 17 Tonnes of CO₂. This means that, in the short term, the cost of training can be paid out of travel budgets in the full knowledge that this investment will be paid back well within the first quarter, and then continue to drive further savings in that area; and in the longer term, the skills that people develop in the web-based environment also have implications for their performance in all of their meetings, and this can transform the performance of the organisation as a whole. Furthermore, increased ability to engage people and ideas across global distances without travel will not only be environmentally positive, it will encourage us to build and extend our international relationships and broaden our horizons.

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So, how should an organisation which wants to realise the true potential of web-based meetings move forward?

The correct place to start is finding out the facts about the current situation. Organisations need to survey their people to gather quantified data on the effectiveness of meetings (both physical and virtual), and the implications that this has for travel and performance. This helps them: to develop an appropriate and properly costed strategy; to target any training effectively; and to manage progress.

From this deeper understanding of what is currently going on within their organisation, they need to develop a clear

vision of how they want things to be different, and the business implications that they wish to target through their work in this area. They need a vision for how their meetings should function, and how that differs from what they have seen. And they need to communicate this vision to their people in a way that gets them to engage with it and hold it as their own.

And then they need to implement metrics and a steering mechanism to objectively assess progress against that vision, and to address any cultural and behavioural issues that may emerge in their pursuit of it.

Only then, should they introduce the training that they need to close the gap. But the training they use should be appropriately selected to support their vision of how meetings should operate, and it should be piloted to ensure that it will produce the behavioural and process changes that they need. It is vitally important that they retain ownership of the progress toward their vision and not abdicate it to a training organisation, because full achievement of the vision will also have implications for the way the business is run from the top.

This may seem like an additional burden on an already overloaded management, but when we stop to consider that two-thirds of management time is concerned with meetings, and that current statistics show that at least half of that time is wasted, then perhaps it is easier to see this in perspective, and to recognise the need to grasp this issue seriously, once and for all.

Feedback in one click: 

So what do you think?

Feedback in one click: 

For background on the research quoted in this article, or to understand more about the opportunities of web-based meetings and further develop your thinking in this area we would recommend the book: **Meeting by Design** ISBN: 978 0954 302146. www.MeetingByDesign.org

Tools to measure and manage meeting effectiveness can be found at Inspirometer.com



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